

A Gallagher
Wedding

a short story

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My mother didn't get married during springtime in the gardens; Macey had gotten that part wrong. That spring, the Gallagher Academy had other priorities.

Massive holes covered the grounds. Hazmat teams had spent weeks digging through the contents of Dr. Fibs's labs and all three Sublevels (what was left of them). The pits were hundreds of feet deep, and they covered the campus. I knew the people in town must have thought we were crazy. But I didn't care. Let people judge you. It never changes the truth.

The trustees had called together a special team of retired Gallagher Girls to collect and archive all of the surviving artifacts and

memorabilia. Even the crumbling walls had been catalogued piece-by-piece, stone-by-stone in preparation for the inevitable job of putting them all back together.

And they *would* go back together. Eventually. My time at the Gallagher Academy had taught me that there are some things that can never, *ever* be pulled apart.

By seven P.M. on the Fourth of July the scaffolding was going up, and the sun was going down. I stood in the loft of the P&E barn, looking out a window at the white tents and folding chairs that covered the lawn. Down below, Bex was fixing Liz's hair. My mom and Abby were tucked away in one of the offices. And someone had given Macey a headset.

"Beta team, you are a go for canapés. I repeat. Beta team, canapés are a go!" When Madame Dabney carried a box full of bouquets into the P&E barn, Macey spun on her. "Are those daylilies?" Macey snapped. "Tell me those aren't daylilies!" Macey bolted across the barn, shouting, "Where are my orchids?"

I started down the stairs as soon as Macey

opened the door. Through the doorway, I could feel the hot summer breeze and hear the sounds of a four-piece orchestra. Waiters walked by carrying silver trays, and a few limos were coming up the drive.

"If I see a carnation, I swear I'm going to hurt somebody!" Macey shouted, and ran outside.

"Well, at least she's not overreacting," Bex said, then patted Liz on the back. "You're finished."

Liz spun and checked the back of her hair in the massive mirror that lined one wall of the barn. It was the very place where we'd learned to perfect our form and land our punches; but on that day, Liz stood and smoothed her silky skirt and patted her updo. In her frilly, delicate dress, she looked like something Renoir might have painted. I smiled at her, almost wistful. It was like I'd stepped into another reality. We were primping in the P&E barn. I wondered if our school's founder would have been horribly offended or extremely proud. But somehow I knew the answer: Gillian Gallagher had killed a

man while wearing a hoop skirt. Gilly wouldn't have minded one bit.

"Cammie, are you okay?" Liz asked me. "Because it would be okay, you know . . . not to be okay."

"I'm fine, Lizzie," I told her. "I swear."

Sure, Macey had told (correction: warned) me that as maid of honor, it was my responsibility to see to the bride's every need. But, thus far, my mother had mostly just needed someone to keep her from killing Macey. I was feeling pretty good about my job when I heard a voice behind me say, "Cammie?"

Aunt Abby looked like an angel. Her dress was long and flowing. A dramatic strap covered one shoulder, hiding the scar from the time she'd gotten shot saving Macey's life. I don't know if Macey had chosen that particular dress for Abby's benefit or her own. My hunch was the latter. It wasn't the type of day when Macey—or any of us, really—wanted to be reminded about our scars.

"What?" Abby asked. She spun around. "Do I have this thing on right?"

"It's perfect," I said.

She took a step and swept her arms toward the small, private office.

"The bride will see you now."

My mother's back was to me when I came into the room, but I could see her eyes reflected in the lighted mirror at the table where she sat. She looked like she was getting ready to take the stage on Broadway.

"Well, here's my maid of honor," Mom said, then glanced at her sister. "Abby, do you mind?"

"I'm going to go check on the groom. If I can find him," Abby said and slipped outside, leaving Mom and me alone.

Mom and me.

Alone.

I stopped for a moment, pondering how that sentence would never be strictly true again. Not really. After that day, it would always be me and Mom and Joe.

"Hey, Mom."

"How you doing, kiddo?" she asked.

"Great. I have something for you," I said,

taking off the necklace that had hung around my neck every day for more than six months. Once upon a time it had belonged to Gilly herself, but that was before my father had found it and locked it away safely where it had waited for me for years.

I held the necklace out toward my mother. "Here," I said.

"I can't take that, sweetheart," Mom said. "It's yours."

"It's something old," I told her. "And something borrowed. And it's already Macey-approved, so you might as well go ahead and . . ."

"Put it on me?" Mom asked, pulling up her hair, so that I could clasp the chain around her neck.

"I love it," she said. "Thank you."

Then Mom turned and took me in, head to toe. I wore a floor-length gown of indeterminate price by a designer who owed Macey's mom a favor. But I refused to put on my heels until the last minute, so I had three-dollar flip-flops on my feet. Mom smiled.

"You're so beautiful." Then her smile faded,

her voice cracked. "You look so much like your dad."

Then she straightened, forced a new smile. "Do you think . . ." My mom couldn't finish. She had stared down terrorists and extremists and spies who were angry about their genius daughters' midterm grades. She shouldn't have been afraid of anything, but she cracked under the weight of those words.

"Dad loved you. And he loved Joe. He would love this."

Mom nodded and dabbed at her eyes. "We should have eloped."

"No." I shook my head forcefully. In the mirror I saw myself and was confused for a moment, because I was looking at my mother in exactly the same way she always looked at me. That day, at least, it felt like our roles had reversed.

"No," I said again. "This is right—you have to marry Joe. Here. Now. This is our fresh start."

Just then Macey called, "Knock-knock," and rushed into my mother's private room. "You're not dressed!" she said. "We have thirty-eight

minutes until sunset. Sunset is when we get good light. Good light is when we get good pictures. This day will be over in a few hours, but the pictures . . . the pictures last forever!"

"Cam," Mom said, her voice a warning—so I grabbed Macey by the arm and pulled her out the door.

"Hey, Mace," I said, "did you see that the caterer was using that canned squirty cheese on the appetizers? I love that stuff."

And with that, Macey was yelling into her headset and darting off again. I might have followed if I'd been capable of moving. Maybe it was the overall emotion of the day: my mother's happiness mixing with the sadness of our broken school. Or maybe it was just because Zach was standing in the middle of the P&E barn. And he was wearing a tux.

"You okay?" he asked.

"That depends," I told him. "My knees just went a little weak—does that count?"

I thought back to the boy who had showed up on our grounds during the spring semester of my sophomore year. He had pulled at his tie and

tugged at his blazer. But now he was perfectly at home in Armani. He wasn't playing dress-up. He didn't look like a kid on the way to prom. He was a man at the start of his career—of his life. And he was looking at me.

There was a time when I thought I knew the Gallagher Academy and its grounds better than I knew the back of my own hand. That time, I guess, was over.

I held on to Zach's arm and, together, we walked around gashes in the ground that were hundreds of feet deep, following a path between hazard tape and stakes that had been carefully laid out by surveyors and architects. It was like walking through the ruins of a city.

On the other side of the grounds, white tents filled the gardens. One held a dance floor. One was for caterers. There were two trailers that served as bathrooms. (Which, according to Macey, were the best mobile sanitation units money could buy.)

Where was Mr. Solomon getting ready? I didn't know. I didn't ask. It would be just like Joe

and Townsend to materialize out of thin air, all tuxedoed-up and perfect.

"The builders have made a lot of progress," Zach said when we reached the construction site.

I slipped between the bars of the scaffolding, held my arms out wide, and spun around. It felt like playing make-believe.

"This is going to be the new Grand Hall," I told him.

"Isn't this where the old Grand Hall was?" he asked.

I smiled. "Exactly." Then I ran through a pair of imaginary doors. "Foyer. Staircase. Hall of History. Library. Of course, there will be a few changes. Sublevel One is going to be more secure than it was before. And they're talking about enlarging the chapel and adding a secondary staircase to the western residential floors."

"And the secret passageways?" Zach asked. "Will they be back?"

"Maybe a few," I teased. "It would be a

shame for future generations of Gallagher Girls not to have . . . options."

I had to stand on my tiptoes in my bargain-bin flip-flops to kiss him underneath an imaginary chandelier. His arm slid around my waist, pulling me tightly against him.

I was faintly aware of the changing light. A shining, shimmering glow seemed to cover the scaffolding and the woods, the P&E barn, and the white tents that caught the fleeting bits of sun.

All that was left of the mansion was stone and ash, but my home was there. Forever.

"Cammie!" Liz yelled. She held up a hand to shield her eyes against the setting sun. "It's time."

I saw my mother in her ivory gown, Bex and Aunt Abby carrying the train as they walked from the P&E barn toward the gardens where people waited in white folding chairs. Mr. Solomon and Townsend stood at attention at the front of the crowd. Even in July and on his wedding day, Joe looked cool, like he

had planned every possible outcome for that moment, and things were going exactly according to plan.

"The bride and groom have requested that their maid of honor and best man join the ceremony," Liz said, holding out my high-heeled shoes. "Besides, you guys have the rings."

"What do you say, Gallagher Girl?" Zach offered me his arm. "Do you want to join them?"

I turned into the light.

"I do."

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